

Tips For Managing Relationships During COVID-19



In the present era of isolation and social distancing, people living together face new types of challenges, including being together for longer periods than most have ever experienced. For some it's a welcome opportunity to be together during an anxious time – for others, this forced togetherness can be another source of stress. *Below are some tips to help navigate conflicts with the people living together:*

- **Address the issues directly.** If you're feeling frustrated or irritated with those you live with, chances are the feeling is mutual. If there are repeated sources of stress, talk about them. Ignoring will only cause them to get worse. Use I statements and don't blame or shame. You are in this together.
- **Consider setting ground rules.** It is best not to have more than 5-6 as too many can feel restrictive. Think about what areas cause the most conflict. For example, if the kitchen is small and you feel on top of each other, set guidelines for who is allowed in the kitchen at a certain times, or how long dishes can be left in the sink before they're washed. Once you have agreement, consider posting a sign to remind everyone of the rules so you don't have to keep repeating. If there are certain topics of conversation that create tension, decide on times when those issues can be discussed or are not to be discussed. For example, establish dinnertime and beyond as a break from challenging topics.
 - **Be aware that finding compromises around media consumption can be especially challenging** as some people feel a need to be constantly connected to the news to monitor the latest developments, while others may want to strictly limit their exposure to avoid having their anxiety increased. Try to establish healthy habits around not consuming media too often throughout the day. If one person feels the need to check updates more frequently, ask them to do so on a computer with headphones or in some way that allows the other people to not be exposed to unwanted media.
- **De-escalate the conflict.** People may be emotionally triggered at different times and by different things. Acknowledge when you're feeling upset or emotional and consider taking a break before talking. Try acknowledging the other person's emotions by saying things like, "It sounds like this is causing you a lot of stress." Remembering that the other person's anger is likely not personal but is being driven by the stress and uncertainty may help you try to deescalate the situation rather than engage in conflict.
- **Criticize the behavior, not the person.** For example, saying something like, "I know we have differing needs about cleanliness, but right now with so much extra stress, seeing dirty dishes is really making me agitated. Would you be willing to do them more often?" This is more likely to result in behavior change than "You're a slob and your dishes in the sink are driving me crazy!"
- **Carve private mental space out of shared physical space.** Sometimes you just need to focus on work or enjoy a needed period of quiet and introversion. Try agreeing on some visible cues that signal a need to not be disturbed. For example, wearing headphones or closing a particular door.
- **Have fun together.** It might seem counterintuitive to spend more time together, but spending positive time together often enables you to be more tolerant of behaviors that may frustrate you. Try building in a fun shared activity each day, for example, cook a meal together, introduce each other to your favorite streaming show or game, or play cards or a board game. It doesn't really matter what you do; the point is to do something enjoyable!

In this situation of intense togetherness during a period of high anxiety, we can start by identifying our own specific sources of stress and our own needs for navigating them. Discussing them with people we live with can then allow us to make a plan that respects and balances all individuals' needs, which may help reduce some sources of conflict before they arise. Of course, this won't be a perfect process, so be as patient as possible with yourself and the people you live with and remember we're all doing the best we can. (adapted from Institute for Disaster Mental Health)